

## This Diwali... let's #burnourchallenges

The challenges of the  
21<sup>st</sup> century

We asked students on [www.toistudent.com](http://www.toistudent.com) to describe the societal challenges that they would like to #burn this Diwali... Here are a few 'burning' issues they raised

## THE POISONED PLANET

Every day, every child on our planet is poisoned by man-made toxins. All of humanity and indeed, all life on Earth, is mired in a toxic swamp of 250 billion tonnes of annual chemical.



emissions from human activity. They are in our food, our water, the air we breathe, the furnishings and materials of our homes, vehicles, schools and workplaces, in wildlife, the oceans, in our bodies and now, even in our genes. Humanity's chemical emissions are four times greater than our carbon dioxide emissions. Medical evidence that this combined assault is damaging human intelligence, gender, reproduction and health is mounting. With IQs being damaged in all industrial societies there is a risk we may become too unintelligent as a species to save ourselves.

There is an answer, though not an easy one. It is for consumers worldwide to stop buying toxic goods and foods, and start rewarding companies which produce clean, safe products. This requires an act of cooperation and knowledge sharing on a global scale, to cleanse our poisoned planet. Concerned citizens, parents, cancer societies, doctors, environmentalists and others are already uniting, worldwide, to start this process. **There must be a new human right – not to be poisoned.**

## FUTURE OF THE INTERNET, MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY

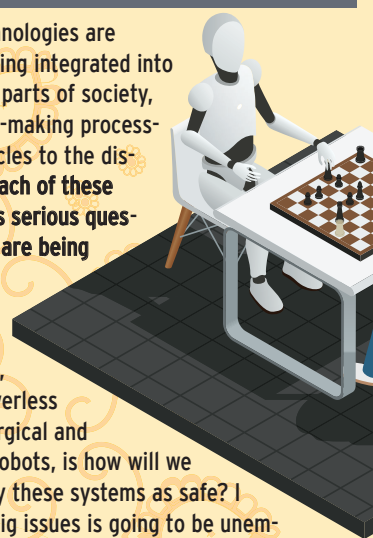
Google was built to provide people with high quality and authoritative results for their search queries. Judging which pages on the web best answer a query is a challenging problem and we don't always get it right. Internet media faces a confluence of human and technology challenges. While they provide the portal for users to find information, they depend on content creators and distributors to apply journalistic discipline to what they are creating. **The scale of popular social networks has democratised publishing, which effectively lets anyone – regardless of their intentions or qualifications – produce content that can appear journalistic.** Another challenge is that technology-driven online engines learn through click-feedback or crowd-sourcing which means information is not always correct or factual. This runs the risk of perpetuating a "herd-mentality" of "fake news" – in which, if lots of users start chasing a particular news source (maybe based on shock value rather than credibility), our AI-systems could accidentally "learn" and treat that source as highly valued or credible. In the

end what we get is news that is not credible. **Over dependence on technology has resulted in this fake news dissemination and if not curbed immediately this could be a huge scare.**



## ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Data-driven technologies are increasingly being integrated into many different parts of society, from judicial decision-making processes to automated vehicles to the dissemination of news. **Each of these implementations raises serious questions about what values are being implemented and to whom these implementations are accountable.** One of the most important challenges faced by AI, which include driverless cars, drones, surgical and manufacturing robots, is how will we be able to certify these systems as safe? I think one of the big issues is going to be unemployment. It seems pretty inevitable that it will create displacement of workers. The solution is simple according to students – integrate labour with technology!



## RESOURCE SCARCITY

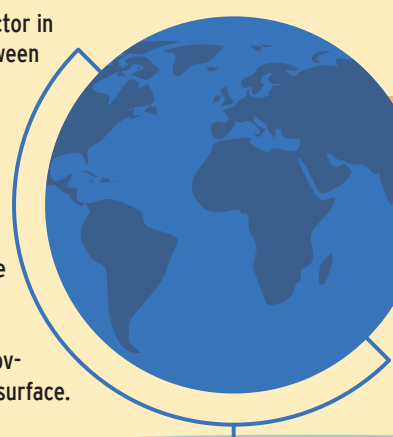


In their lifetime, the average person uses 100,000 tonnes of fresh water, 750 tonnes of soil, 720 tonnes of metals, 5 billion energy units and emits 300 tonnes of greenhouse gas. No wonder resources are becoming scarce and landscapes worldwide being ruined to obtain them. The self-evident answer is to re-use everything, and then re-use it again. Thanks to technology the 'circular economy' is already feasible and becoming cost effective, while green energy is rapidly replacing fossil fuels. However resistance – by political and vested interests – continues to block it.

## INEQUALITIES AND DISPARITIES

Climate change is a causal factor in the increasing disparity between the haves and have nots. So too are racism and classism. Climate change exacerbates the challenges thrust upon impoverished people. Solutions should be structural as well as grassroots. Intentional systems will need to be part of the process to reach common vision and goals.

The programmes offered by governments are only scratching the surface. Impoverished communities still lack the resource/capac-



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ity to make full use of technologies. Although the methods are already known and commonplace, awareness is next to negligible and that can be a concern.

Culture is part of the solution to finding common ground between wealthy and impoverished (and all in-between). **The way to go about it is to inculcate awareness programmes in schools and colleges.**

## #BurnTheBhedBhaav



day and age. Inspired by this thought, students were encouraged to take a pledge to stand up against discrimination and discuss how would they do it. "I realised that people were judged by their

surname. I felt it wasn't fair and hence I suggested that we give everyone a nickname in class. No surnames required here," said DD Man (Dhruv) from class VIII. Another student talked about her campaign against discrimination – "why can't our class didis have lunch with us in the canteen? One can always take turns to have lunch with them. We should practice this at homes as well," said Aditi Ghosh from class VI.

## HEALTH AND HUMANITY

Recent advances in gene editing suggest a future in which we can radically upgrade human genomes. We might use tools to rewrite genes that influence traits such as intelligence and lifespan. We should bear in mind when we contemplate this enhanced future that the obvious answers aren't always the right ones. **The human genome isn't something we should seek to build a wall around, protecting it from all change.**

But a rush to enhance ourselves may erase aspects of our humanity that proper reflection reveals as valuable. Proper thinking on what we might want to preserve takes time and a lot of thinking. For example, instead of choosing to live longer and be more intelligent than the other, we should be looking to enhance human values like sympathy and empathy.



## FOOD SECURITY

World food security is on a knife-edge – for the simple reason that population and economic growth will drive the global food demand to double by the 2060s. Traditional methods like topsoil, freshwater, fish, oil and fertiliser have failed. To solve the problem using modern agriculture will only (a) worsen climate change, (b) destroy more land and water, (c) accelerate extinctions, (d) displace farmers, and (e) undermine human health. In other words, it's a solution that makes things worse. **On the other hand, using recycled water and nutrients, by converting the rest to low-intensity carbon eco-agriculture is a win-win situation which addresses the threats.**



## HOW TO

REDUCE  
SCREEN  
TIME

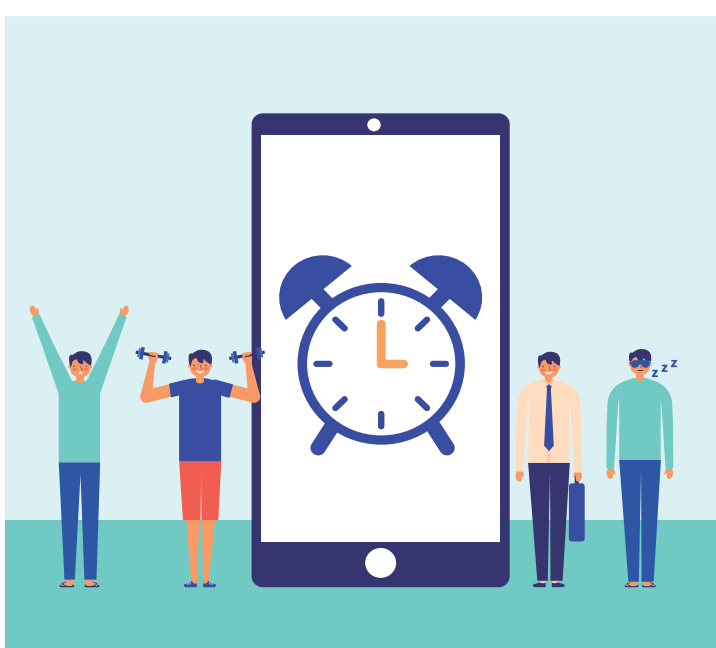
The recommended screen time for 8-18-year-olds is about two hours a day. If you are looking for ways to limit the time you spend browsing through your electronic devices, these steps could come in handy

## Track it

How many hours do you spend on television, computer games and cell phones every day? If you don't know, it's a good idea to keep tabs on that. Track how many minutes or hours you spend on the computer, TV and cell-phones and note it down. Now set usage limits (say one hour of TV etc) and also a target date to reach that limit. Now see how far you have gone.

## Create a tech-free zone

Establish zones in your house where electronic gadgets such as smartphones and laptops are not allowed. The study and bedroom can be great tech-free zones. **Using gadgets just before going to bed is a definite no-no.** We tend to spend more time on tablets or phones when we use them while in bed. This can interfere with your sleep. **Don't charge your phone next to your bed, as you will be tempted to check messages through the night.**



## STRATEGISE WELL

- 1 **Disable notifications.** When you want to unplug and avoid distraction, turn off notifications.
- 2 **Take a break.** Social networking apps such as Facebook let you temporarily lock yourself out from them.
- 3 **Turn off the TV:** If all members of the family stick to a specific TV time, it will enable you to

restrict screen time.

- 4 **Get an alarm clock.** Using the phone as an alarm clock will require you to keep it in the bedroom.
- 5 **Opt for 'physical' books,** not e-books.
- 6 **Take off apps from home screen,** so that you don't just open them by force of habit.



## Apps to keep check

A screen time tracker will let the user fix usage time. Once this duration is over, the user will not be able to access any features on the phone. Apps such as Digital Wellbeing, Windown, Break-free and AppDetox, Stay on Task, Flipd are some of the trackers to keep you in check.

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